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# WHAT THE HUMANITIES ARE FOR – A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** In the wake of both 9/11 and the financial crisis of 2008, the humanities have been offered as constituents of higher education which, if more prominent and more strenuously promoted, might have prevented both events. At the same time, the humanities have undergone an assault from governments in the West, with massively reduced or wholly cut funding as part of an attempt to promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in universities. The response from parts of the humanities to these government initiatives has been strident, insisting that a thriving humanities or liberal arts curriculum is crucial to democracy, ethics and citizenship, and that the humanities should be an essential ingredient of science and business education. Contemporary semiotics' deployment of the concept of *Umwelt* demonstrates that the contribution the humanities might make to theory, practice and social life remains indispensable. Yet this contribution is of a rather different character to that portrayed in the traditional defence of 'humanistic' study. Indeed, the example of semiotics reveals that the humanities themselves are regularly misconceived.

A personal story illustrates one of the main points in what follows. When I was about 10 years old, I was standing outside the surgery of the local general practitioner, looking at the plaque near the front door. I turned to my dad, asking why doctors need to have so many qualifications, why they have to leave school with a range of exams passed rather than simply focusing on the practice of medicine as their one and only subject. My dad, described on my birth certificate as a "wheel turner" for the Ford Motor Company, someone who had left school at 14 and was placed as one of the most lowly functionaries of late capitalism, was able to reply with a degree of insight which, unfortunately, seems to be beyond that of many senior managers in universities, education policymakers and powerbrokers. His reply to my questions was that it is necessary for doctors to demonstrate that their minds are active in other subject areas than just medicine so that their specialism is not merely a matter of niched competence, that it is informed from without and also because they need to be able to carry out the great many diverse tasks involved in their job.

In light of this, it is interesting to recall that one accusation frequently lodged at semiotics, both from within and outside the academy, is that it is insufficiently specialised. Semiotics does not always fit into disciplinary compounds or institutional enclaves, both of which latter are reified, although often of only recent vintage. In contrast to subjects in the humanities, semiotics has not become institutionalised. Some think it is synonymous with linguistics; others think semiotics' home is in visual culture and the study of the non-linguistic; yet others see it as a literary 'method'. Much of this is a hangover from the fashionable moment of semiotics from the period of, roughly, the 1960s to the 1980s, when semiotics seemed to many to be like a kind of magical decoding device. The one benefit for semiotics that lingers from that period, is that semiotics, despite massive change and development in the last three decades, is still largely associated with the power of utility (*pace* the tedious arguments about 'audiences' meanings' – see Cannizzaro and Cobley 2015). The humanities, by contrast, are currently under assault for their perceived lack of utility. As will be seen, the humanities are found wanting in the face of the putative utility of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and they are increasingly called upon to demonstrate direct economic use-value. Subject areas such as medieval history are seen by critics of the humanities as

being arcane, over-specialised and divorced from the brute economic realities which are supposedly paramount in contemporary life.

Without wishing to draw too facile a distinction, semiotics is accused of being over-generalised, despite having some of the flavour of practicality that is imputed to the sciences; the humanities are accused of being over-specialised and without demonstrable utility. Although the intent here is not to rely on this distinction, it does serve as a starting point to discuss the pratfalls of a knee-jerk defence of the humanities, and to suggest that a more nuanced response to the assault on liberal arts education in general — a response which might be decisively informed by semiotics — could be put centre stage in common understandings of what the humanities are for. That a more convincing response to the assault is desperately needed is demonstrated by the fact that the squeezing of the humanities, and the universities that house them, has accelerated even in the face of two key events in the last fifteen years.

First, in the wake of 9/11 there was a commonly-held view that the terrorists used education in a purely instrumental fashion; *The 9/11 Commission Report* assiduously lists the university affiliations of the main conspirators, all of whom studied science and technology, apart from Hani Hanjour who sojourned in the United States to study English and later took flying lessons. Indeed, some have pointed to the prevalence of ex-engineering students in terrorist attacks (Popper 2009, Gambetta and Herzog 2007), ultimately leading to the question “Is there something in an engineering education, such as that of 9/11 attacker Mohamed Atta, that, due to a lack of a component of humanities study, could lead to a lack of compassion for others?” (Bryson 2010).

Secondly, the financial crisis of 2008 brought to the fore much hand wringing that had been already fomenting in business schools (see Ghoshal 2005), centred on the dehumanizing process of business education. As the full extent of the catastrophe of subprime lending at the turn of the twenty-first century was becoming clear, many called for a renewal of the humanities and an infusion of liberal arts into business schools (for example, Colby et al 2011).

Yet such considerations have cut no ice with governments. In the UK, for example, a key plank of the post-2010 Tory government’s policy has been to cut all funding to humanities in universities through raising fees for all humanities subjects.

That the humanities as a whole is failing to articulate its worth in contributing to the activity of the mind in the current climate is cause for concern. Addressing this from the standpoint of semiotics, the following topics will be considered: ‘The humanities’ own public relations’; ‘The ‘other’ humanities’, ‘Transdisciplinarity’, ‘Ethics’, ‘Anti-humanism’, ‘Agency and Umwelt’. Finally, I will attempt to formulate ‘What the humanities are for’.

### **The humanities’ own public relations**

The ‘rise’ of the humanities can be traced back to Cicero’s concept of *humanitas* – being good – and its development in Western education, particularly the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of medieval philosophy faculties, embracing humanities and natural sciences alike, as against the professions (medicine, law, theology). Closer to our time, though, the humanities in their most familiar form are a product of nineteenth-century Western education: they developed in tandem with the forging of a liberal hegemony in industrial society of that period and contributed to the reproduction, through instruction - in what is civilized and ‘good’ — of the bourgeois class in their mercantile and civic incarnations. Again, the philosophical faculty contained humanities as well as sciences (as is still the case in the Liberal Arts programmes in the US), while the natural sciences only became autonomous in

the latter half of the nineteenth century. The *decline* of the humanities has arguably occurred steadily through the same period in the face of the rise of the natural sciences (Kagan 2009), but most rapidly with Western governments' promotion of STEM in the academy during recent decades, managed through a crisis of funding.

As far as business schools have been concerned, the putative humanizing value of the humanities has been asserted repeatedly at crisis points in late capitalism. During the Cold War, McAllister's quasi-ethnographic study *Business Executives and the Humanities* (1951) gave voice to numerous managers who valued, above all, a liberal arts/humanities background for their recruits. These aspirations or requirements were echoed later in the decade by the Carnegie Foundation study (Pierson 1959) and the Ford Foundation study (Gordon and Howell 1959), each concerned with business and higher education. In the Reagan era, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business report (Lyman and McKibbin 1988) made similar noises, followed in turn by the report of the American Council of Learned Societies (1988). By the early twenty-first century, a full-blown crisis in business schools seemed to have developed globally, with numerous critics calling for the re-humanization of business education, usually by way of compulsory humanities modules. Ghoshal 2005 has already been mentioned; preceding him, Pfeffer and Fong 2002 and Mintzberg 2004 could be added, along with, later, Bennis and O'Toole 2005; Starkey and Tempest 2006, Starkey and Tiratsoo 2007 and Morsing and Rovira 2011 and those reporting inept practice by business school graduates (Feldman 2005; Blasco 2009). A recent milestone in this train of thought is the Carnegie Report, which concluded (Colby et al 2011: 5): "Like all undergraduates, business students need the ability to grasp the pluralism in ways of thinking and acting that is so salient a characteristic of the contemporary world". That pluralism, which the report suggests is fostered by the humanities, is assumed to be lacking in business graduates but also, it might be said, among religious fundamentalists, *particularly* those who would inflict terror.

If the situation was not sufficiently overdetermined already, the last decade also saw a major crisis in Western universities as a whole. In another ethnography, lightly 'fictionalized', Tuchman 2009 pithily illustrated some of the nodal points of the crisis, witnessing the adversarial pitting of a management class against an intellectual class and the 'deprofessionalization' that has beset university professors in similar ways to its infliction on lawyers and doctors. With managers in the ascendant, along with context-free accountants scouring university spreadsheets (no doubt following an education in business that the authorities in the previous paragraph would deplore), it was unsurprising that questions began to be raised by apparent ingenues about what universities are for. In addition to asking whether it is really worth employing certain professors and buying certain equipment for universities, accountants' questions about the contribution of certain subject areas to direct economic growth become inevitable. As Collini (2012: 144-5) notes,

[I]t's usually at this point in the argument that an appearance is made by one of the more bizarre and exotic products of the human imagination, a wholly fictive place called 'the real world'. This sumptuously improbable fantasy is quite unlike the actual world you and I live in. In the actual world that we're familiar with, there are all kinds of different people doing all kinds of different things – sometimes taking pleasure in their work, sometimes expressing themselves aesthetically, sometimes falling in love, sometimes telling themselves that if they didn't laugh they'd cry, sometimes wondering what it all means, and so on. But this invented entity called 'the real world' is inhabited exclusively by hard-faced robots who devote themselves single-mindedly to the task of making money. They work and then they die. Actually, in the fictional accounts of 'the real world' that I've read, they don't ever seem to mention dying, perhaps because they're afraid that if they did it might cause the robots to stop working for a bit and to start expressing themselves, falling in love, wondering what it all means, and so on, and once that happened, of course, 'the real world' wouldn't seem so special anymore,

but would just be like the ordinary old world we're used to. Personally, I've never been able to take this so-called 'real world' very seriously. It's obviously the brainchild of cloistered businessmen, living in their ivory factories and out of touch with the kinds of things that matter to ordinary people like you and me. They should get out more.

He is not wrong. Indeed, Collini's characteristically witty observation should serve as the standard riposte to any blinkered imbecile who dares to hide behind the myth of the economically hard-nosed 'real world'. However, as will be argued, Collini's eloquent defence of the humanities as worthwhile amidst the university crisis — because they are “inherently” good or interesting — is not tenable on its own.

In response to the more recent attacks, the defence of the humanities has been undertaken by numerous of its representatives besides Collini in the last few years, often re-hashing jaded ideas from the very liberal hegemony which has lately sought to condemn the humanities to, at best, marginal status in society and, at worst, oblivion. Thus, the humanities have been cast by their defenders as the repository of 'values' (McDonald 2011) or, even more pointedly, 'good' values as opposed to “our current values and their devastating consequences on a precarious world” (O'Gorman 2011: 281). The humanities, it has been claimed, teach people how to live their lives (Andrews 1994: 163), they condense collective experience (Bate 2011: 66) and they preserve both democracy (Nussbaum 2010) and civilization (Watt 2011: 205). A further confection on liberal protestations in favour of saving the humanities is located at the intersection of national languages, ethics, and multiculturalism. Other languages, the argument goes, enrich our culture (Kelly 2011; Freeman 1994) and allow knowledge of 'the other' in a fashion that, at the very least, provides the platform for an ethical standpoint. The humanities are seen as crucial to promoting diversity — teaching students to work with others who are not like them (Tuchman 2009: 208) — because, unlike approaches in some business schools, for example, the humanities are putatively opposed, in their very existence, to de-humanization. Echoing psychologists such as Zimbardo and Milgram, as well as prominent critics of business education from *within* business schools, such as Ghoshal (2005) and De George (1994), Nussbaum (2010: 23) insists that “It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them”. The acme of such humanist hyperbole regarding the humanities is where such arguments reveal their fragile basis and give way to the ridiculous; the words of the broadcaster and academic, Mary Beard (2001: 26), on the preservation of classics because it “is a subject at which the British do very well indeed”, reflected by Parker Pearson 2011 on archaeology and Howard 2011 on British academia in general, lie in this domain.

By contrast, there is a sublime position growing out of the definition of the humanities as fostering harmony or standing against de-humanization. Here, the discussion of the immediate use-value of the humanities is repudiated in favour of a subtle formulation of inherent worth. Bate 2011 shows that the 'value' of the humanities cannot be calculated in the immediate way that many translations of scientific developments into technological advance can. In the wake of 9/11 and resurgent Islamic fundamentalism, he writes (2011: 2), “it was perhaps unfortunate that the swingeing funding cuts to higher education in the early 1980s fell with particular severity on supposedly marginal areas of the humanities, such as 'Islamic Studies'”. More emphatic, still, is Fish's (2008: 14) refusal to rise to the challenge:

To the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said . . . diminishes the object of its supposed praise.

Fish, here, is responding in particular to those who would attempt to furnish the humanities with 'effects' or 'results' in the manner of some areas of the sciences and business. Nevertheless, it is a view broadly shared with some other contemporary commentators (cf. Collini 2012) on the threatened demolition of universities.

There is a need to be clear about the terminus of such arguments about the humanities. Fish and others seem to be converging on that well-known shibboleth, common to discussions in many degree review and validation processes in universities: 'knowledge for its own sake'. While it is a worthy aspiration, it is strictly an intellectual version of the Land of Cockaigne, the preserve of those with private incomes. Likewise, the notion of the humanities as a civilizing tool, a less trenchant view but one nevertheless similarly drawing on individualist and humanist roots like 'knowledge for its own sake', is ultimately self-defeating. Tuchman (2009: 208) sees the humanities as promoting diversity and teaching students to work with others who are not like them; O'Brien (2010: ix) and Nussbaum (2010: 7) insist they are essential for democracy; and Pugès (2011: 61) claims they are instrumental in understanding other cultures and experiences, enabling people to keep an open mind. All of these arguments, however, are functionalist: they see the humanities as social tools, rather than necessary extensions of humans' cognitive bearing as a species. Thus, the obvious example of 'intercultural communication', a laudable area of investigation in communication sciences, was swiftly co-opted as a management tool, in much the same way as 'ethics' and 'diversity' are now (Nelson, Poms and Wolf 2012). It is difficult to escape the conclusion that "The humanities is an often overindulged and oversold commodity, especially in the hands of liberal arts college presidents and some recent secretaries of education" (Solomon 1994: 48). It is also clear that the version of the humanities that is oversold is not necessarily familiar to those who teach and publish in the discipline.

### **The 'other' humanities**

In his excoriation of business school practice, Ghoshal asks (2005: 83–84):

why does the pessimistic model of people as purely self-interested beings still so dominate management-related theories? The answer lies not in evidence but in ideology . . . The roots of the ideology lie in the philosophy of radical individualism articulated, among others, by Hume, Bentham, and Locke.

As is also argued in the current essay, Ghoshal is pointing out that if one wishes to address ideology – including that ideology which has culminated in an attempt to banish the humanities – then the last people one would want to consult are humanists. The project of de-humanization which is integral to the subordination of people to so-called the 'real world' is a logical outgrowth of the ideology in which humans are compelled to realise themselves as individuals - *at all costs*. Althusser 1969 made this point, in compelling fashion, many years ago. However, it has not curtailed the assumption, on the part of those outside the humanities, that the humanities is predicated on, and begets, both humanism and individualism.

Nevertheless, the simple point can be asserted: the humanities are not necessarily humanist. Indeed, the virtues that the humanists have found to be universal and enriching have been repeatedly repudiated as oppressive by such fields as postcolonialism. The subject area in which I have spent most of my time, institutionally - communications, media and cultural studies – has consistently, implicitly and explicitly, challenged such humanist edifices as the canon and authorship of the 'best', while introducing questions to do with the fragmentation of contemporary identity. Semiotics has done the same – but more systematically, with commitment to transdisciplinarity and without automatic disdain for science. When one considers such features of the modern humanities landscape which are not entrenched in a humanist liberal arts paradigm, then many other approaches and fields start to

add their names: social constructionism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, posthumanism, systems theory, radical constructivism and, again, postcolonialism. In their most productive guises, what has characterised all of the above has been a commitment to transdisciplinarity.

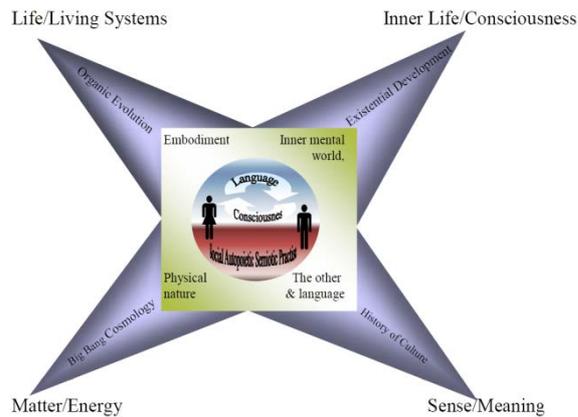
## **Transdisciplinarity**

Although semiotics traces its genealogy back to the Hippocratic Corpus of symptoms, its presence in the academy as a formal pursuit owes much to what might be called 'the synchronic moment' in the twentieth century (cf. Deely 2010). That moment, when analysis of the products of human endeavour gradually started to replace valorization of discrete cultural artifacts, was also key to the inauguration of transdisciplinarity. It was represented by the work of Saussure in Switzerland; Propp and the Formalists in Russia; Ogden, Richards, Empson and Leavis in Britain; the New Criticism, Innis, McLuhan and Frye in North America; the structuralists in France; the Prague Linguistic Circle in Czechoslovakia; so-called 'Soviet semiotics'; the Copenhagen School in Denmark; systems theory and cybernetics in Europe and the Americas. Thus, the synchronic moment, where close reading or analysis came to the fore, witnesses a significant change in some of the key disciplines of the humanities in the second part of the twentieth century. Linguistics became less concerned with teaching foreign languages and more dedicated to the workings of language in general, drawing, especially, on semiotics' separation of linguistics into 'syntactics', 'semantics' and 'pragmatics'. A good proportion of contemporary literary study became devoted to analysis of the workings of literariness rather than trying to wheedle out what is 'the best' that has been thought and written. An indication of how far literary studies has come through reinventing itself in the last thirty years is offered by some of the innovative work emanating from the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts. In the Fine Arts which, by virtue partly of their name, are still somewhat wedded to notions of the sublime, there has nevertheless been a move away from pure aesthetics to greater consideration of the concept of design. In philosophy, the elusive 'good life' has been superseded by a focus on analysis, criticality and unpredictability.

The prime mover in the majority of these instances has been the emergence of the idea of the *text*, developed, of course, by semiotics but with a remit and reach that has not only facilitated transdisciplinary approaches but also made text's predicates part of common parlance in the humanities. In the early writings on the topic, by the idea's simultaneous but unconnected originators, Barthes 1977 and Lotman 1982, it is possible to discern the struggle to make the concept emerge (cf. Marrone 2014). Despite this struggle, the testimony to text's fecundity is in how quickly the concept of was taken up by other scholars in the wake of the synchronic moment. Such scholars were bearers of a transdisciplinary perspective on their subject areas, demonstrating by reference to 'text' how manifestations of art, literature, philosophy, and verbal language are not instances of magic but specific exemplifications of a more general textuality. Clearly, the notion of text was instrumental in closing the 'great divide' (Huysen 1986) between high and low culture. This is something I recognized early in my career in higher education as I began teaching popular narrative, with an emphasis on close reading, to cabinet makers in a General Studies (liberal arts) department. This soon metamorphosed into the teaching of communication theory, particularly the theoretical underpinnings to conducting close analysis. Central to the movement away from appreciating 'quality' to analysis of texts is the dimension of social class. The concept of the text betokens 'neutrality' or, at the very least, the attempt to shelve the ephemeral forces that may valorize or render a text in a particular way such that it is read in a fashion that is 'self-evident', 'common sense', or 'obvious' (cf. Copley 2000). Therefore, the purpose of analysing a text is to find out how it works and, by extension, to help accumulate a sense of how all texts might work. Academic engagement with the text in this frame is decidedly *not* an exercise in 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) geared to the inculcation of good 'breeding' or 'taste'. It is more of a technical skill potentially accessible to all, as befits a democratic society.

The transformation wrought by the concept of ‘text’, shifting the focus from the ‘good’ to the ‘analytic’, is the defining feature of contemporary humanities, although one would not know it if the only evidence on offer was that of the humanities’ humanist defenders. Yet, while the insights attendant on the concept of ‘text’ suffuse the humanities, there is one corollary of transdisciplinarity that the academy is more slow to accept: that science and the humanities are not irrevocably divided. The space afforded here is insufficient to discuss the fortunes of the ‘two cultures’; however, it is possible to briefly outline two areas where semiotics has contributed to the closing of the division. The first is relatively straightforward: it derives from the idea that if the humanities can be read as text, then there is absolutely no reason why the practices of science cannot be read as text also. Indeed, semiotics has given birth to one of the foremost exemplars of the understanding of nature with reference to textual and semiotic principles: biosemiotics. In identifying the semiotic basis of natural processes, biosemiotics has fundamentally challenged the mechanist worldview that is routinely promulgated by schoolteaching’s reliance on a Newtonian model of science.

Second, there is the more complicated critique, at the level of philosophy of science, whereby the arts and humanities are placed alongside the sciences in a sometimes non-hierarchical relationship between different kinds of knowledge of the universe. Cybersemiotics (Brier 2008), comprising much of biosemiotics, compels a vision of life, consciousness and cultural meaning as constituted by the continuities of nature and evolution. In this, it does not differ from general semiotics in the contemporary period; however, cybersemiotics specifically addresses life/consciousness/cultural meaning with reference to the qualities of experience each renders. It challenges physicalist science, with its ideal of third person knowledge, replacing it with an imperative to consider first person embodied consciousness. This is not to be underestimated: bourgeois humanism, by default, has connected well with common sense because it has always been predicated on its own, instrumental version of the first person: individualism. Yet, unlike much contemporary cultural analysis or constructivism which sees knowledge as constructions and plays of language and power, cybersemiotics is predicated on the *embodiment* of first person consciousness, which thus puts consciousness in relation to nature as continuous over plant and animal existence. Organism, environment, cognition, signs and reality – none of these are issues to be settled by one discipline. For this reason, cybersemiotics is transdisciplinary, tracking those areas in the humanities and the sciences where there have traditionally been materialist, organismic orientations in understanding phenomena and where there have been semiotic, cognitive orientations, also seemingly dictated by the phenomena with which they have been most concerned. This is summed up by Brier’s (2010: 1907-11) “cybersemiotic star”:



The four areas of knowledge that cybersemiotics identifies obviously demand transdisciplinarity. Moreover, as Brier argues, they also demand a theory of the observer. Physics, he notes (2010: 1911), relies on the notion of an observer of physical ‘events’ but

it does not have a theory of what the observer is that goes further than computation and information . . . Meaning, experience, qualia and will are still outside that paradigmatic foundation of physics which, through chemistry, leads into general cell and body physiology

One might easily add to this that the humanities need a theory of the observer. The ‘other’ humanities, particularly through semiotics, have been diligent in questioning the role of agents in the world. The humanists, on the other hand, have seemed to fall back on the assumption of an absolute, universal human agency, even as that agency is being nullified in the dismantling of the humanities. For this reason, I believe that the convincing articulation of what the humanities are for depends on a stance that is anti-humanist.

### **Anti-humanism**

The humanism that has often been taken as synonymous with the humanities can be summed up as “in short, bringing out what is best in us” (Solomon 1994: 50). This ideology is clearly evident in so many of the protestations against the assault on the humanities that have been quoted so far. One can understand the knee-jerk response: Churchwell for example (2014: 29), is strident:

The politicians and corporations telling us that the humanities do not matter are, by no coincidence, the same people who think of us only as workers and consumers, not as citizens or individuals, and who strip away our human rights, one by one. It is the wealthy who insist that we should seek only to work: we don’t need the humanities, they tell us, all we need is to labour in the marketplace that will enrich them, not us.

What is left out here is that 'they' very much believe in the individual; it is precisely why 'they' want to limit the opportunities open to others. The only collectivity 'they' can envisage without fear is the one that 'they' seek to impose. Clearly, the fundamental terms of the argument need to change from their individualistic/humanistic co-ordinates that are so tied up with the right to self-determination and enrichment. From the side of the humanities, such arguments are of a piece with the idea that the task of the humanities is to exalt "The best that has been thought and said". However much the proponents of humanist humanities may think they have left such views behind by teaching about women writers, black artists, Navajo verbal expression, and Lao Tzu, their defence of the humanities in terms of breeding and the 'good' resuscitates the ghosts of Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, Mortimer Adler, Robert Hutchins and Lionel Trilling. In putting a notion of 'the human' at the centre of existence, the plight of the guardians of the 'good' is the "theoretical unevenness" that Althusser (1969: 223) discerned in 'socialist humanism'. Amidst the legacy of the terror and totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, many Marxists (including inside the Soviet Union) found themselves in a dilemma in denouncing this most prominent embodiment of supposed socialism. Althusser (1969: 236) suggests that socialist humanists fall back on a simplistic couplet, 'human/inhuman':

When, in the relations between Marxists and everyone else, the former lay stress on a socialist personal humanism, they are simply demonstrating their will to bridge the gap that separates them from possible allies, and they are simply anticipating the movement trusting to future history the task of providing the old words with a new content.

Bourgeois humanism, Althusser shows (1969: 247), made 'man' the principle of all theory, with a shadowy concept of 'inhumanity' acting somewhere as 'man's' obverse. In this way, humanism can have some purchase as a practical, ideological slogan, rooting out instances of 'inhumanity'. Humanism, additionally, may have some value as a "practical index" (1969: 247) – in the case of humanist protestations against cuts in the humanities, perhaps as 'propaganda' – but it is only "an imaginary treatment of real problems" (ibid. 247); it has no theoretical value.

Thus, anti-humanist thinkers – including those who have informed my thinking, such as Peirce, Sebeok, Hoffmeyer, Brier, Petrilli, Luhmann, Althusser, Agamben, Badiou and Deely - do not put the individualized human at the centre of existence. Nor do they trade in essences such as 'self-interest' or apply universal categories to people. They certainly do not take the tack of the arch-humanist, Condillac, in formulating *ethics* as a matter of self-interest. The anti-humanism in semiotics, in particular, envisages humans within semiosis and within *Umwelten*. Human agency is not a matter of standing outside semiosis and administering signs like an air traffic controller, as humanist understandings of the humanities would have it. Human agency *is* the *Umwelt*; we are within the products of semiosis that make up the objects of the humanities.

### **Agency and Umwelt**

One could say, broadly, from a semiotic perspective, that there are two kinds of agency. The first might be called 'sociosemiotic', deriving from humans' situation vis-à-vis semiosis in cultural formations. Since this is the topic of my essay, 'To be *means* to communicate' (also in this issue, pp.     ), I would direct readers to that essay's provision of an attempt at an overview. The other kind of agency is 'biosemiotic', in the realm of semiosis which is putatively not subject to the vagaries of cultural or socio-political forces.

This distinction, of course, is problematic for three main reasons. First, all semiosis is 'social' in character in that it involves more parties than just one (Cobley and Randviir 2009); secondly, culture, as Sebeok repeatedly emphasized, is just one small compartment of nature; thirdly, as Agamben (1998) and others attest, semiosis 'in nature' is more frequently subject

to the vagaries of socio-political forces than we often acknowledge. Nevertheless, agency has become a central theme in biosemiotics (Tønnessen 2014) and is instructive for the question of what the humanities are for. Biosemiotics has identified agency at very lowly biological levels, in the most rudimentary of organisms. For Hoffmeyer (1998), it is possible to identify agency in any organism that develops ‘semiotic competence’ in the semiosphere – that is, in any realm in which signification or communication may take place. Biosemiotics has been at pains to demonstrate the occurrence of semiotic competence in places that have not hitherto been considered for their agency. As far as the humanities are concerned, this is an important point because it not only indicates some measure of continuity across some components of humans and other organisms, but it also suggests the ways in which agency is ‘inhabited’. However, there is need for caution, because agency, as has been seen, is clearly taken for granted in the humanities (cf. Copley 2010). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘inhabiting’ is crucial.

‘Inhabiting’ might be said to be what organisms do in their Umwelt. They also ‘create’ their Umwelt through circulating signs – semiosis. Introduced by Jakob von Uexküll (1936, 1937), the idea of Umwelt is pivotal in biosemiotics. For some it is the ‘world’ of signs which an animal *creates/inhabits* according to the sensorium it possesses. As delineated by Sebeok, especially after 1979, the Umwelt can be understood as a ‘model’ of its world that any organism might harbour; it allows that organism to survive, to navigate, to avoid predation, to seek out comfort and nourishment. It is the ‘objective’ world in Deely’s sense (2009), because the animal encounters phenomena that can only be ‘objects’ - not independent phenomena in the complete fullness of their awareness-independent physical “reality” - dosed with the experience that the animal’s sensorium affords. A moth, observes Hoffmeyer (2008: 200),

is equipped with a totally silent Umwelt, apart from the narrow chink that is kept open for registering the bat’s fateful frequencies of approximately 20,000 Hz. When the bat is far away, the moth naturally veers away from the sounds, but when the bat comes up close, the moth instead makes sudden and unpredictable movements. The moth, in other words, displays Umwelt-controlled behaviour.

The human Umwelt clearly does not afford humans the ability to detect the presence of bats with such a high degree of accuracy. However, it does allow humans a staggering capacity to differentiate objects in the world, supplemented with an ability to imagine new objects, including fictional ones, and to recognize the difference between “things” as things and objects as things in relation to some finite mind. In this, the human Umwelt is aligned with one of its main components: verbal language’s potential to produce an infinite number of sentences.

The enhanced ability to imagine and the possibility of projecting that is inherent in the human Umwelt gives rise inevitably to ethics. Ethics requires both the ability to envisage another world more ethical than the present situation. Still, it is important to avoid the assumption that ethics implies agency in the form of will (Copley 2007). The humanist defenders of the humanities seem to be suggesting that humanities subjects cultivate agency in the direction of ethical projects. This, of course, is a gross over-simplification of both structural/agentive interaction and ethics.

## **Ethics**

Again, semiotics offers a corrective to the individualist accounts of human agency which subtend humanist defence of the humanities. The central insight of ethics as semioethics is that ethical imperatives cannot spring from individual predispositions. Petrilli has developed this with respect to the over-arching requirement of ‘responsibility’ and with reference to the work of Victoria Welby, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and

Thomas A. Sebeok. 'Responsibility' gives rise to ethics firstly because dialogue is not something to which one may subscribe; rather it is imposed on humans. While the individual human may choose to disregard the call of the other, that call does not cease. Thus, Petrilli (also in her work with Ponzio; see also Deely 2010: 107–125) developed the concept of semioethics to play out the imperatives attendant on this call, in contrast to willed ethics. "A global and detotalizing perspective on life and interpersonal relations", writes Petrilli (2014: 330),

demands a high degree of otherness, readiness to listen to the other, a capacity for opening to the other and for dialogic interconnection with the other. According to this approach, the tendency toward dialogic detotalization prevails over totalization. Otherness opens the totality to infinity or to 'infinite semiosis'. Such an orientation necessarily leads to the ethical order and investigates the condition of unconditional implication with the other beyond any specific ideological orientation.

Semioethics thus implicates the human *qua* human. As the animal which is distinguished by its ability to recognize that there are such things as *signs* rather than simply responding to signs; Deely, Petrilli and Ponzio (2005) hold that the human is compelled to care for semiosis or, by association, all life on the planet. What circumstances are needed for this to be universally realized is not clear; however, the displacement of human uniqueness to the domain of semiosis from the essence that is beloved of the humanists constitutes a significant step.

Semioethics has not been alone in questioning whether ethics represents the pinnacle of a human essence. Posthumanism, zoosemiotics and animal studies have been prominent in dispelling essentialism. Furthermore, they have also been instrumental in asking whether there is some pattern in nature at large whence ethics arises (see, for example, De Waal 1996). If there is such a pattern, humanism's already low stock is further depleted and the defence of humanities needs to look for more rigorous arguments. If the humanities are not the repository of good 'values', if they do not teach people how to live their lives, if they do not directly guarantee the preservation of both democracy and civilization or promote diversity, if they are not inherently 'good', if they do not prevent dehumanization, if they do not exist to shoulder these social roles, then what are the humanities for?

### **other**

#### **What the $\wedge$ humanities are for**

Despite the fact that it is unsupported by a source and noted as apocryphal, Churchwell (2014: 29) nevertheless 'quotes' Richard Dawkins – fanatical promoter of science, arch-mechanist, militant atheist, and the emotional punchbag of all manner of people, from fundamentalist Christians to vitalists – as saying, on exiting an art gallery in Florence, "But what's all this art *for*?" She argues that this question articulates "a widely held view among the instrumentalists and technocrats who decide our society's priorities". Clearly, she does not believe that this is a fair and valid query.

However, I am compelled to disagree – it is not a question particularly well put, but it is fair to ask it in general terms for the simple reason that the arts and humanities themselves have always been instrumental. They cannot be defended by humanists as the repository of values one minute and then be pronounced to be value-free the next. Typically, the humanities have been particularly instrumental when they have been denying their instrumentality: at moments of crisis such as the one they are experiencing now, or at moments of triumph when they have served the purposes of colonialism through intellectually subjugating non-Western people. The criticality which exposes such denial is a discourse on instrumentality, as is the meta-criticality which humanists eschew. Furthermore, criticality sees such denial also outside the colonial moment strictly defined; even in the humanities'

social tasks, lauded by the humanists, of upholding diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance and gaining local knowledge, there lies instrumentalism and even aggression (Alibhai-Brown 2000).

A distinct difference characterizes the ‘other’ humanities, a difference which humanist public relations neglects to mention. Many of the ‘other’ humanities, without bracketing social issues, have introduced, in varying degrees, questions of cognition and evolution. Diversity, for example, is conceived in the ‘other’ humanities as a matter of learning the multifarious ways in which the world can be modelled. It is not a matter of discovering the many artifacts accruing to different cultures around the globe and fitting them into a Western definition of universal values. Rather, in posthumanism and animal studies, to take two related instances, diversity entails considering how animality traverses human and non-human worlds and where the human gradually gives way to the machine. Such perspectives would seem to offer much more mileage regarding the question of what the humanities are for than either the affronted response of humanists that the question is indecorous, or the unsustainable assertions that the humanities guarantee the growth of a fictional human essence and the establishment of a utopian ‘good’ society.

Semiotics’ perspective on the humanities is best exemplified by the conclusions from Sebeok’s essay, ‘Prefigurements of art’ (1979a). Written as a literature review of the extant work on ‘aesthetic behaviour’ in animals, the essay also draws illustrative conclusions about human modelling (for a fuller discussion, see ‘Enhancing survival . . .’, this issue, pp. ). It does so by stressing that humans are unique in possessing a faculty for both verbal and nonverbal communication and that human brain functioning associated with these areas is such that there are certain limited continuities of the nonverbal between humans and non-human animals. Surveying the nest decoration of the satinbird, dancing gorillas, painting chimps, ‘musical’ whales and others, Sebeok ultimately concludes that animals’ aesthetic behaviour is implicated in enhancing survival by not enhancing survival. Much, if not all, of the use-value of aesthetic behaviour consists in not appearing to possess use-value; nevertheless, it serves a long-term purpose for the animal, a purpose which consists of enhancing, extending, and embellishing the animal’s Umwelt, offering more variation and differentiation of the world and thereby potentially allowing the animal to more efficiently negotiate its environment to avoid predation and more efficaciously seek out sustenance. For non-human animals, classifying and differentiating in this way is obviously of paramount importance. For humans, the act of classifying involved in aesthetic behaviour, as well as its survival purpose, has become buried by layers of pleasure; aesthetic acts are not seen as a struggle for continued existence. But neither, anymore, are most sex acts. The very ‘uselessness’ of classifying, then, may be what will help humans to solve problems that are present or lying in wait for us.

What ‘Prefigurements’ demonstrates, ineluctably, is that ‘Knowledge is for something’. Knowledge was always for something. Knowledge will always be for something. It has a ‘scaffolding’ dimension for humans (see Copley and Stjernfelt 2015); it has other, more direct, functions, too, whether that knowledge is ‘scientific’ (based on putative ‘third-person experience’) or whether it is knowledge of a different stamp, rooted in ‘first-person experience’. In light of Sebeok’s essay, knowledge could never exist for its own sake, although its layering over might give that impression. As such, aesthetic behaviour *is* survival and it is so because of its contribution to the Umwelt of the animal engaged in such behaviour. Research in arts and humanities is to be conceived as a survey of what is being (or has been) explored in the human Umwelt, how that has taken place, how the human Umwelt is furnished and embellished, and also (where it is possible to discern) what contributions the arts and humanities are making to the survival of the species. *This* is what the humanities are for. They have a cognitive bearing that does not occlude their social bearing. The act of ‘aesthetic classification’ discussed by Sebeok is the stock-in-trade of the arts. The work of ‘aesthetic classification’ is central, also, to the humanities in its close relation to the arts.

Like many other teachers in higher education, I have observed the way in which students feel that they have undergone a transformation following schooling in as relatively modest a practice as close reading. In the terms of semiotics, that transformation amounts to an augmented Umwelt, a firmer grasp on the richness of the world that humans inhabit. That grasp cannot be turned to instant economic advantage, even if such were desirable, although it might have some social uses. Like much culture, it is not without 'use-value', but the majority of its use-value consists in not appearing to possess use-value. The yahoos and philistines of economic instrumentality will not cease their questions in response to a demand that they simply accept this paradox.

To preserve the humanities there is a need to be assured of what the humanities are for – that is, not to enable the saccharine sweet appreciation of a human essence but, in sum: to enhance survival chances in an Umwelt that is threatened by despoliation, to do so through principally cognitive rather than social means, to understand the limits of human agency and its continuity with the agency of other organisms on the planet, to grasp the relationship of responsibility entailed in the semioethics of this continuity and, as a product of the only animal that can recognize that there are such things as signs, not to allow overspecialization to become an obstacle to presiding, in a Hippocratic manner which does no harm, over the diversity of semiosis.

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